

# Recipe for change: 10 “golden rules” for getting more local and organic food onto hospital menus

This factsheet explains how hospitals have succeeded in providing patients with more appetising and nutritious meals for patients, made with more local and organic ingredients.

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Hospitals in a number of European countries are procuring local and organic food to make the meals they serve more appetising and nutritious, while also protecting the environment and boosting the local economy.

- In Austria the 18 hospitals of the Vienna Hospitals Association (KAV) are serving up a 32% organic menu. Between 80 and 90 per cent of the food comes from Austrian producers.
- In the eastern Belgian city of Liege the Hopital de la Citadelle sources 95% of its food from Belgian producers – 100% in the case of meat. Freshly prepared salads and locally grown seasonal fruit are supplemented by Fairtrade bananas.
- Three hospitals in West Zealand, in eastern Denmark, are procuring half the food they serve from organic farmers. New menus and the use of organic ingredients have helped to reduce waste in hospitals where €470,000 worth of food used to be left uneaten each year.
- In the United Kingdom the Royal Cornwall Hospitals Trust (RCHT) is spending 41% of its food budget for three hospitals on local produce, and has cut food miles by 67%. London’s Royal Brompton Hospital has a menu that is 18% local or organic, including organic milk from Bedfordshire and organic apple juice from Kent.

All these hospitals have managed to transform their menus cost-effectively. West Zealand, RCHT and the Royal Brompton have avoided any increase in costs; KAV has increased its

catering budget by just 10% compared to when it was using no organic food; Hopital de la Citadelle spent 12% less on its catering in 2006 than in 2004. All report the enthusiasm of patients and staff for the new menus.



Patients at Karolinska University Hospital, Sweden, are responding positively to menus using plenty of fresh vegetables and increasing amounts of organic ingredients.

© Medicinsk Bild, Karolinska University Hospital

So how is this kind of success achieved? The following ten ‘golden rules’ summarise the collective wisdom of these hospitals and others in Italy and Sweden that have been successful in procuring fresh, local and organic food to



transform menus. The ideas here also incorporate insights from the EU's sustainable procurement handbook<sup>1</sup>, the UK food and farming NGO Sustain<sup>2</sup> and a report on best practice in sustainable procurement produced by the local food consultancy f3 for the NGO Food Links UK<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. Undertake research and make a plan

- Begin your project planning in good time for any new initiative to be integrated into your hospital's annual business planning and its menus.
- Read the EU's sustainable procurement handbook to familiarise yourself with the practical steps required and the constraints of the legal framework
- Consider the main categories/dimensions of sustainable food – minimally processed, locally produced, organic, seasonal and fairly traded. Decide what your priorities will be and the extent to which each should play a part in your hospital's procurement
- Consider setting percentage targets for fresh, local and organic food. These have proved effective in a number of countries in focusing minds and driving change
- Make sure any targets are realistic and credible in your national and local context
- Research the cost implications of sustainable sourcing thoroughly, and set your initial targets with a pragmatic eye on your budget.
- Make sure you consult in detail with staff and patients. Their concerns, preferences and priorities should inform your planning
- Involve your hospital's press office in your plans – your initiative will benefit from well planned and targeted publicity.

## 2. Secure management support

- The most successful sustainable food initiatives in hospitals have been those where senior managers provide whole-hearted support and become advocates for the project
- Use the findings from your initial research to lobby for the backing and active involvement of senior management. Draw upon authoritative evidence of the health, social, economic and environmental benefits of local and organic procurement to make your case<sup>4</sup>.

## 3. Take a step-by-step approach

- Change can be a slow and difficult process, so don't try to do everything at once
- Consider implementing your plans one category of food or one product at a time. The sequence can be determined by a combination of practical necessity (eg when contracts are due to expire) and strategic priority (eg organic milk is sometimes one of the first organic products to be sourced by hospitals because the evidence of nutritional benefit is particularly compelling)
- Involve a wide range of stakeholders in project consultation and planning - including patients, doctors, dieticians, catering staff and procurement managers – so that you take people with you every step of the way.

## 4. Offset any higher ingredients costs by shortening supply chains and using fresh ingredients

- A number of pioneering hospital food initiatives have found that sourcing directly from local producers reduces costs because it cuts out the middleman in the supply chain
- An emphasis on using more fresh ingredients also helps to control costs, as it results in a reduced reliance on more expensive processed foods
- Once the quality of your menus has improved, you can charge high-street cafeteria prices for the food you serve in your hospital canteen, helping to recoup some of the costs of your patient menu.

## 5. Make simple menu changes to improve health and sustainability

- Use free-range or organic meat and serve smaller portions so that the overall cost is similar. Eating less meat than is the norm in a modern western diet is recommended on both health and environmental grounds
- Use more fresh fruit and vegetables. Make sure that fresh fruit is always available on the dessert menu – organic, local and seasonal where possible
- Substitute fresh fish for frozen and oily fish for white. Choose fish certified to Marine Stewardship Council sustainability standards
- Use more herbs and spices to season foods and reduce the use of salt and sugar



The new menu of the Royal Brompton Hospital (London, UK), which has been very successful in introducing sustainable food. See our factsheet “A menu for change” for more information.

© Royal Brompton Hospital

- Cut down on frying and grill or steam more foods instead
- Don't forget the vending machines on hospital premises – so often a focal point for promoting and selling unhealthy snack foods and fizzy drinks high in fat, salt and sugar. Procure healthier snacks and make bottled water and organic milk drinks available.

## 6. Identify and support potential local and organic suppliers

- Use an existing trade or NGO directory or database, or ask local economic regeneration partners to produce one
- Undertake well targeted publicity to attract potential suppliers
- Invest time in making telephone contact, arranging visits to farms and factories where possible and appropriate, and organising ‘meet the buyer’ events
- Explore whether there are any regional producer cooperatives that can supply you, enabling your hospital to source a greater volume and variety of fresh produce through a single contact
- Consider splitting some supply contracts into lots by geographical or commodity units (eg separate ice cream or yoghurt provision from the main dairy contract) to create more opportunities for smaller local suppliers and for high-quality products from specialist companies
- Be prepared to give small producers and other local businesses help with contract paperwork and/or training to meet the demands of public-sector procurement.

## 7. Use tenders and contracts to define your agreed sustainability criteria

- EU rules make it illegal to specify that a supplier of goods or services to the public sector should be locally based
- It is possible, however, to specify freshness, seasonality and frequency of delivery – all of which can increase opportunities for small local producers
- Foods produced using recognised methods of production – organic products, for example, or those with PGI or PDO status – can also be specified in tender documents
- Nutritional guidance – such as the maximum fat content required in minced or diced meat, or the explicit exclusion of transfats, or the minimum meat content of sausages – can be specified too
- There is a good example of model specification clauses available on the website of the UK’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs<sup>5</sup>.

## 8. Invest in kitchen facilities and staff training

- Good in-house kitchen facilities are crucial if a hospital is to optimise the freshness and texture of the food it serves and ensure maximum flexibility in offering a variety of options to patients with different pathologies. Be prepared to upgrade your facilities if they are inadequate
- Staff training is also important. It is no good sourcing healthier food if those working in the kitchens do not have the skills and experience to work with fresh and organic produce.

## 9. Join forces with other hospitals and partners

- Consider partnerships with other hospitals and public sector buyers, as well as private sector caterers, that are procuring food. A hospital could utilise the cheaper forequarter cuts of organic beef from cattle whose prime steaks are being sold to hotels or restaurants, for example
- Joining forces could increase your buyer strength and create economies of scale. It could also help reduce duplication, waste and fuel pollution from public food procurement, if planning and delivery can be shared
- Identify local food groups and other NGO partners that might be able to help you with identifying suppliers, or auditing the benefits of sustainable procurement, or raising public awareness.



## 10. Communicate and promote what you are doing

- Use the findings from your patient surveys and other data, such as measures of benefit to the local economy or cuts in food miles, to help publicise what you are trying to achieve
- Get the media and the public on your side with a high-profile launch event involving your chief executive
- Don't make grand claims too soon but invite the media in to report on your progress at an appropriate point
- Use communication with patients and staff about menu changes and the origin of the foods being served as a platform to get healthy-eating messages across
- Use internal and external communications to give credit to those who deserve it among your staff, building motivation and commitment.



Trainee chefs Salame Jacbe (left) and Jerry Oduro learn their trade in the Royal Brompton Hospital's main kitchen, where staff work with plenty of fresh, local and organic ingredients.

© Rachel Hughes/Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Trust

### Where can I find out more?

This fact sheet is based on the report *Fresh, Local and Organic*, which contains a fuller, scientifically referenced explanation of the benefits of sustainable food sourcing, together with case studies from eight hospitals across Europe and a step-by-step guide for hospitals that want to establish their own sustainable food initiatives.

See <http://www.noharm.org/europe/food>

For European Union guidance on the legal and practical considerations of sustainable procurement, see the EU action guide *Buying Green!* at [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/buying\\_green\\_handbook\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/buying_green_handbook_en.pdf)

There is a good example of model contract specification clauses for sustainable food procurement at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/pdf/psfpi-clauses.pdf>

- 1 *Buying Green! A Handbook on Environmental Public Procurement*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2004.
- 2 Hockridge E and Longfield J. *Getting More Sustainable Food into London's Hospitals*. London: Sustain, 2005.
- 3 Michaels S. *Best Practice in Sustainable Public-Sector Food Procurement*. F3/UK Food Links, 2006. Available on the Defra website at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/pdf/foodlinks-bestpractice.pdf>
- 4 <http://www.noharm.org/europe/food>
- 5 <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/pdf/psfpi-clauses.pdf>

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